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THE PESSIMIST'S PROGRESS: J.-K. HUYSMANS.

BY JAMES HUNEKER.

*"Ah! Seigneur, donnez-moi la force et le courage
De contempler mon cœur et mon corps sans dégoût."*

—BAUDELAIRE.

I.

JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS has been called a mystic, a naturalist, a critic, an aristocrat of the intellect; he was all these, a mandarin of letters and a pessimist besides—no matter what other qualities persist throughout his work pessimism is never absent, his firmament is ever clotted with black stars. He had a mediæval monk's contempt for existence, contempt for the mangy flock of mediocrity; yet his genius drove him to describe its crass ugliness in phrases of incomparable and enamelled prose. It is something of a paradox that this man of picturesque piety should have lived to be the accredited interpreter, the distiller of its quintessence, of that elusive quality we name "modernity." The "intensest vision of the modern world," as Havelock Ellis puts it, Huysmans unites to the endowment of a painter the power of a rare psychologist, with a lycanthropic nature. A collective title for his books might be borrowed from Zola: *My Hatreds*. He hated life and its eternal *bêtise*. His theme, with variations, is a strangling Ennui. With those devoted sons of Mother Church, Charles Baudelaire, Barbey D'Aureville, Villiers de l'Isle, Adam and Paul Verlaine, eccentric sons whose actions so often dismayed their fellow worshippers of less genius, Huysmans has been affiliated. But he was not a poet nor, indeed, a man of imagination. He did not possess the novelist's talent. His was not the flamboyant genius of Barbey, nor had he the fantastic invention of Villiers. He seems closer to Baudelaire, rather by reason of his ironic, critical temperament than because of his creative gifts. Baudelaire's oriflamme was embroidered with preciously devised letters of

gold which read: "Spleen and Ideal"; upon the emblematic banner of Huysmans this motto is "Spleen." His work at times seems like a prolongation in prose of Baudelaire's. And by reason of his exacerbated temper he became the most personal writer of his generation. He belonged to no school, and avoided, after his beginnings, literary groups or schools.

He is recording-secretary of the petty miseries and ironies of the life about him. Over ugliness he becomes almost lyric. "The world is a forest of differences." His pen, when he depicts an attack of dyspepsia or neuralgia, or the nervous distaste of an hypochondriac for meeting people, is like the triple sting of a hornet. He is the prose singer of neurasthenia, a Hamlet doubting his digestion. When he painted the *nuance* of rage and disgust that assails a middle-aged man at the sight of an underdone mutton chop his phrases are unforgettable. The tragedy of the gastric juices he has limned with a fulness of expression that lifts pathology to the dignity of art. A descendant of Flemish painters, sculptors, architects (Huysmans of Mechlin, the Antwerp-born painter of the seventeenth century is said to be a forbear), he inherited their powers of envisaging exterior life; those painters for whom flowers, vegetable markets, butcher-shops, tiny gentle Dutch landscapes, gray skies, skies of rutilant flames and homely details were surfaces to be passionately and faithfully rendered. This vision he has interpreted with pen instead of brush. He is a virtuoso of the phrase. He is a performer on the single string of self. He knows the sultry enharmonics of passion. He never improvises, he observes. All is willed and conscious, the cold-fire scrutiny of a trained eye, one keen to note the ignoble or any deviation from the normal. His pages are often sterile and smell of the lamp, but he has the candor of his chimera. Well has Remy de Gourmont called him an *eye*. In his prose, he sacrifices rhythmic variety and tone to color. His rhythms are massive, his color at times a furious fanfare of scarlet. Every word, like a note in a musical score, has its value and position. He intoxicates because of his marvellous speech, but he seldom charms. It is a sort of sinister verbal magic that steals upon you as this ancient mariner from the lower moral deeps of Paris fixes you with his glittering eye, and in his strangely modulated language tells tales of blasphemy and fish-wives' tales of half-forgotten rivers below

the bed of the Seine, of dull cafés and dreary suburbs, of bored men and stupid women, of sordid, opulent souls, souls spongy and voluptuous, mean lives and meaner alleys—such an epic of ennui, mediocrity, bizzare sins, and neurotic, superstitious creatures was never given the world until Huysmans wrote "*Les Sœurs Vatar*" and "*A Rebours*." Entire vanished districts of Paris may be reconstructed from his chapters. Zola declared, when Guy de Maupassant and Huysmans appeared side by side in "*Les Soirées de Medan*," that the latter was the realist. However, it was not Huysmans who was to write the ideal ecclesiastical novel, but Ferdinand Fabre, in his "*L'Abbé Tigrane*." Fabre was the lesser artist, yet the greater novelist of the two.

The unity of form and substance in Huysmans is a distinguishing trait. He had early mastered literary technique, and the handling of his themes varies but little. There are, however, two or three typical varieties of description which may be quoted as illustrations of his etched and jewel-like prose. A cow hangs outside a butcher-shop:

"As in a hothouse, a marvellous vegetation flourished in the carcass. Veins shot out on every side like the trails of bind-weed; dishevelled branch-work extended itself along the body, an efflorescence of entrails unfurled their violet-tinted corollas, and big clusters of fat stood out, a sharp white, against the red medley of quivering flesh."

Surely a subject for Snyders or Jan Steen.

Léon Bloy somewhere describes Huysmans' treatment of the French language as "dragging his images by the heels or the hair up and down the worm-eaten staircase of terrified syntax." Huysmans, in "*A Rebours*," had called M. Bloy "an enraged pamphleteer whose style was at once exasperated and precious." And magnificence of phrase in evoking a picture can go no further than the following—Englished by Arthur Symonds—which shows us Gustave Moreau's Salome:

"In the perverse odor of perfumes, in the overheated atmosphere of this church, Salome, her left arm extended in a gesture of command, her bent right arm holding on the level of the face a great lotus, advances slowly to the sound of a guitar, thrummed by a woman who crouches on the floor. With collected, almost anguished countenance, she begins the lascivious dance that should waken the sleeping senses of the aged Herod; her breasts undulate, become rigid at the contact of the whirling necklets; diamonds sparkle on the dead whiteness of her skin, her bracelets, girdles, rings, shoot sparks; on her triumphal

robes sewn with pearls, flowered with silver, sheeted with gold, the jewelled breast-plate, whose every stitch is a precious stone, bursts into flame, scatters in snakes of fire, swarms on the ivory-toned, tea-rose flesh, like splendid insects with dazzling wings, marbled with carmine, dotted with morning gold, diapered with steel blue, streaked with peacock green."

Gautier—who was for Huysmans only a prodigious reflector—Flaubert, Goncourt, could not have excelled this verbal painting, this bronze and baroque prose, which is both precise and of a splendor. And Huysmans can describe a herring as would a great master of sumptuous still-life:

"Thy garment is the palette of setting suns, the rust of old copper, the brown gilt of Cordovan leather, the sandal and saffron tints of the autumn foliage. When I contemplate thy coat of mail I think of Rembrandt's pictures. I see again his superb heads, his sunny flesh, his gleaming jewels on black velvet. I see again his rays of light in the night, his trailing gold in the shade, the dawning of suns through dark arches."

Or this invocation when Huysmans had begun to experience that shifting of moral emotion which we call his "conversion"—he was a Roman Catholic born, therefore was not converted; he but reverted to his early faith:

"Take pity, O Lord, on the Christian who doubts, on the sceptic who desires to believe, on the convict of life who embarks alone, in the night, beneath a sky no longer lit by the consoling beacons of ancient faith."

His method is not the recital of events, but the description of a situation; a scene; not a narration; but large tableaux. Action there is little; he is more static than dynamic. His characters, like Goncourt's, suffer from paralysis of the will, from hyperæsthesia. The soul in its primordial darkness interests him, and he describes it with the same penetrating prose as he does the carcass of a cow. He is a luminous mystic who speaks in terms of extravagant naturalism. His violent, vivid style so excellent in setting forth colored sensations is equally admirable in the construction of metaphors which make concrete the abstract. There is the element of the grotesque, of the old, ribald Fleming, in Huysmans, though without a trace of hearty Flemish humor. Nor is the pepper of sophistry absent. He sculpts his ideas. He is both morose and fulgurating. He squanders his emotions with polychromatic

resignation unlike a Saint Augustine or a Newman, yet we are not deeply moved by soul-experiences. It is not vibrating sincerity that we miss; it would be wrong to question his return to Catholicism. He is more convincing than Tolstoy; for one thing, there was no dissonance between his daily life and his writings, after the publication of "*En Route*." Lucid as is his manner, clairvoyant as the exposition of his soul at the feet of God, there is, nevertheless, an absence of unction, of tenderness, which repels. Sympathy and tenderness are *bourgeois* virtues for Huysmans. Too complicated to admire, even recognize, the sane or the simple, he remained the morbid carper after he entered La Trappe and Solesmes. As an oblate, his fastidiousness was wounded by the minor annoyances of a severe regimen; his stomach always ailed him. Perhaps to his weak digestion and a neuralgic tendency we owe the bitterness and pessimism of his art. He was not a normal man. He loathed the inevitable discords of life with a startling intensity. The venomous salt of his wit he sprinkles over the raw turpitude of men and women. Impassible as he was, he could be shocked into a species of sub-acid eloquence if the theme were the inutility of mankind. No Hebraic prophet, not Swift himself, ever launched such poignant phrases of disgust and horror at the world and its works. His favorite reading were the mystics, à Kempis, Saint Theresa, St. John of the Cross and the Flemish Ruysbroeck—the motto of "*A Rebours*" is taken from Ruysbroeck: "Needs must I rejoice beyond the age, though the world has horror of my joy and its grossness cannot understand what I would say."

In a new edition of "*A Rebours*" he has told us that he was not pious as a youth, having been educated not at a religious school. "*A Rebours*" came out in 1884, and it was in 1892 that he went to La Trappe. He confessed that he could not discover, during the eight intervening years, why he swerved to the Church of Rome. But his books do. Diminution of vital energy was not the chief reason for his reversion. The operation of "divine grace" in Huysmans' case may be dated back to "*A Rebours*." The modulation by the way of art was not a difficult one. And he had the good taste of giving us his experiences in the guise of art. It is the history of a conversion, though he is, without doubt, the Durtal of the books. The final explosion of grace after years

of unconscious mining, the definite illumination on some unknown road to Damascus, took place between the appearance of "*La Bas*" and "*En Route*." We are spared the *technique* of faith reawakened. It had become part of his cerebral tissue. We are shown a Durtal, believer; also a Durtal profoundly disgusted with the oily, rancid food of La Trappe, and with the faces of some of his companions, and a Durtal who puffs surreptitious cigarettes. At Lourdes, in his last book, he is the same Durtal-Huysmans, grumbling at the odors of unwashed bodies, at the perspiring crowds, at the ignorance and cupidity of the shrine's guardians. A pessimist to the end. And for that reason he has often outraged the sensibilities of his co-religionists, who questioned his sincerity after such an exclamation as: "How like a rind of lard I must look!" uttered when he carried a dripping candle in a religious procession. But through the dreary mists of doubtings and black fogs of unfaith the lamp of the Church, a shining point, drew this hedonist from his chilly ecstasies to it. Like Taine and Nietzsche, he craved for some haven of refuge to escape the whirring wings of Wotan's ravens. And in the pale woven air he saw the cross of Christ.

Leslie Stephen wrote of Pascal: "Eminent critics have puzzled themselves as to whether Pascal was a sceptic or a genuine believer, having, I suppose, convinced themselves, by some process not obvious to me, that there is an incompatibility between the two characters." Huysmans may have been both sceptic and believer, but the dry fervor of the later books betrays a man who willingly humiliates and depreciates the intellect for the greater glory of God. His portrait of Simon the swineherd in "*En Route*" is mortifying to normal humans. Huysmans penetrates the husks and filth and sees only a God-intoxicated soul. Here is, indeed, the "treasure of the humble." At first, religion with Durtal was æsthetic, the beauty of Gothic architecture, the pyx that ardently shines, the bells that boom, the odors of frankincense that rolled through the nave of some old vast cathedral with flame-colored windows. In "*L'Oblat*" the feeling has widened and deepened. The walls of life have fallen asunder; the soul glows in the twilight of the subliminal self, glows with a spiritual phosphorescence; Huysmans is nearer, though not face to face with, God. The object of his prayer is the Virgin Mary; to the hem of her robe he clings like a frightened child at its mother's dress.

All this may have been auto-suggestion, or the result of the "will to believe," according to the formula of Professor William James, yet it was satisfying to Huysmans, whose life was singularly loveless and secret. His terrible death-bed was the final test of his sincerity.

He was born on February 5th, 1848, at Paris, and died in that city on May 12th, 1907. He was educated at the Lyceum Saint-Louis. He contemplated the profession of law; but, at the age of twenty, he entered the Ministry of the Interior, where he remained until 1897, a model, unassuming official, fond of first editions, posters, rare prints and a few intimates. He went then to live at Ligugé, but returned to Paris after the expulsion of the Benedictines. He was elected first president of the Academy Goncourt, April 7th, 1900. He was nominated chevalier of the Legion of Honor, and given the rosette of officer by Briand, though Huysmans begged that he should have no military honors at his funeral. It was for his excellent work as a civil servant that he was decorated, and not as a man of letters. At the time of his death, his reputation had suffered an eclipse; he was distrusted both by Catholics and free-thinkers. But he never wavered. Attacked by a cancerous malady, he suffered the atrocious martyrdom of his favorite Saint Lydwine. Léon Daudet, François Coppée and Lucien Descaves were his unwearrying attendants. At the last, he could still read the prayers for the dying. He was buried in his Benedictine habit. But what an artist perished in the making of an amateur monk.

"His face," said an English friend, "with the sensitive, luminous eyes, reminded one of Baudelaire's portrait, the face of a resigned and benevolent Mephistopheles who has discovered the absurdity of the divine order, but has no wish to make improper use of his discovery. He gave me the impression of a cat, courteous, perfectly polite, most amiable, but all nerves, ready to shoot out his claws at the least word." [Huysmans, like Baudelaire, was fond of cats; he valued them more highly than women.] When the present writer saw him several years ago in Paris, he was struck by the essentially Semitic contour of his head—some legacy of remote ancestors from the far-away Meuse.

II.

To traverse the books of Huysmans is a true pessimist's prog-

ress; from "*Le Drageoir aux Epices*" (1874) to "*Les Foules de Lourdes*" (1906), the note, at times shrill, often profound, is never one of dulcification. The first book, a veritable little box of spices, was modelled on Baudelaire's "*Poèmes en Prose*," but revealed to the acute critic a new personal shade. Its plainness is Gallic, though actual lubricity is absent. That amusing, ironic sketch, "*L'extase*," so often quoted, gives us a key-note to the writer's disillusioned soul. "*Marthe*" (1876) caused a sensation. It was speedily suppressed. "*La Fille Elise*" and "*Nana*" the public could endure; but the cold-blooded delineation of vice in this first novel was too much for the Parisian, who likes a display of sentiment or sympathy in the treatment of unsavory themes. Now, sympathy for sin or suffering is missing in Huysmans. Slow veils of pity never descend upon his sufferers. Like a surgeon who will show you a "beautiful disease," a "classic case," he exposed the life of the wretched Marthe, and, while he called a cat a cat, he forgot that certain truths are unfit for polite ears accustomed to the rotten-ripe Dumas *films*, or the thrice brutal Zola. It was in "*Marthe*" that Huysmans proclaimed his adherence to naturalism in these memorable words: "I write what I see, what I feel and what I have experienced, and I write it as well as I can: that is all." This rubric he adhered to his life long, no matter his change of spiritual base. He also said that at bottom there were writers who have talent, and others who have not. All other details, schools, groups, cliques, whether romantic or naturalistic or decadent, do not count. He proved this by his own habits, those of an artistic solitary.

It was 1880 before Huysmans was again heard from, this time in collaboration with Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique and Paul Alexis. "*Les Soirées de Médan*" was the inappropriate title of a book of interesting tales. Huysmans' contribution, "*Sac au Dos*," is a story of the Franco-Prussian war that would have pleased Stendhal by its sardonic humor. The hero never reaches the front, but spends his time in hospitals, and the nearest he gets to the glory of war is a chronic stomach-ache. The variations on this ignoble motive showed the perverted malice of Huysmans. War is not hell, he says in effect, but dysentery is; how often a petty ailing has unmade a heroic soul. Naturally, in the face of Maupassant's

brilliant "*Boule de Suif*," Huysmans' sly attack on patriotism was overlooked. "*Croquis Parisiens*" (1880) contains some specimens of Huysmans' astounding virtuosity. No one before has ever described sundry aspects of Paris with such verisimilitude. Balls, cafés, bars, omnibus-conductors, washerwomen, chestnut-sellers, hairdressers, remote landscapes and corners of the city, cabarets, "*la Bièvre*," the underground river, with prose paraphrases of music, perfumes, flowers—Huysmans astonishes by his prodigality of epithet and justness of observation. What Manet, Pissarro, Raffaëlli, Forain, were doing with oil and pastel and pencil, he accomplished with his pen of a magician. "*A Vau L'Eau*" followed in 1882. By some it is considered the typical Huysmans tale, and some see in Jean Folantin its unhappy hero, obsessed by the desire for a juicy beefsteak, the prototype of Durtal. Folantin is a poor employee in the ministry who must exist on his annual salary of fifteen hundred francs. He haunts cheap restaurants, lives in cheap lodgings, is seedy and sour, and with the nerves of a voluptuary. His sense of smell makes his life a nightmare. The sordid recital would be comical but that it is so villainously real. Dickens would have set us laughing over the woes of this Folantin, or Dostoiévsky would have made us weep—as he did in "*Poor Folk*." But Huysmans has no time for tears or laughter; he must register his truth, and at the end an odor of stale cheese exhales from the printed page. Wretched Monsieur Folantin! Of the official life so clearly presented in some of Maupassant's tales, we get little, Huysmans is too much preoccupied with Folantin's stomach troubles. In the same volume, though published first in 1887, is "*Un Dilemme*," which is a pitiful tale of a girl abandoned. Huysmans, while he came under the influence of "*L'Éducation Sentimentale*," seems to have taken as a *leit motif* the idiotic antics of Flaubert's "*Bouvard et Pécuchet*." This pair of mediocre maniacs were his models for mankind at large. "*Les Sœurs Vatard*" (1879), praised so warmly by Zola in "*The Experimental Novel*," is not a novel, but kaleidoscopic Parisian pictures of intimate low life, executed with consummate finish, and closeness to fact. The two sisters Vatard, Céline and Désirée, with their love affairs, fill a large volume. There are minute descriptions of proletarian interiors, sewing-shops full of perspiring girls, railroad-yards, locomotives and a gingerbread fair.

The men are impudent scamps, bullies, *souteneurs*, the women either weak or vulgar. Veracity there often is and an air of reality—though these swaggerers and simpletons are silhouettes, not half as vital as Zola's Lise or Goncourt's Germinie Lacerteux. But atmosphere, *toujours* atmosphere—of that Huysmans is the compeller. Not a disagreeable scene, smell or sound does he spare his readers.

We reach *bourgeois* life with "*En Ménage*" (1881). André and Cyprien the novelist and painter are not so individual as, say, old *père* Vatarde in the preceding story. They but serve as stalking horses for Huysmans to show the stupid miseries of the married state; that whether a man is or is not married he will regret it. Love is the supreme poison of life. André is deceived by his wife, Cyprien lives lawlessly. Neither one is contented. The novel is careful in workmanship; it is like Goncourt and Flaubert, both gray and masterful. But it leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Like the early Christian fathers, Huysmans had a conception of Woman, "the eternal feminine of the eternal simpleton," which is not ennobling.

"*A Rebours*" ("Against the Grain") appeared at the psychologic moment. Decadence was in the air. Either you were a decadent or violently opposed to the movement. Verlaine had consecrated the word—hardly an expressive one. The depraved young Jean, duke of Esseintes, greedy of exotic sensations, who figures as the hero of this gorgeous prose-mosaic, is said to be the portrait of a Parisian poet, and a fashionable dilettante of art painted by Whistler. But there is more of Huysmans—the exquisite literary critic that is Huysmans—in the work. If, as Henry James remarks, "When you have no taste you have no discretion—which is the conscience of taste," then Huysmans must be acclaimed a man of unexampled tact. His handling of a well-nigh impossible theme, his "technical heroism," above all, his soul-searching tactics in that wonderful Chapter VII, when des Esseintes, suffering from the malady of the infinite, proceeds to examine his conscience and portrays for us the most fluctuating shades of belief and feeling—his touch here is sure, and casuistically immoral, as "all art is immoral for the inartistic." The chief value of the book for future generations of critics lies in Chapters XII and XIV. Huysmans's literary and artistic preferences are catalogued with delicacy and erudition. More

Byzantine than Byzance, "*A Rebours*" is a storehouse of art treasures, and it was once the battle-field of the literary élite. It is a history of the artistic decadent, the man of disdainful inquietudes who searches for an earthly artificial paradise. The mouth orchestra which, by the aid of various liquors, gives to the tongue sensations analogous to music; the flowers and perfume concerts, the mock sea—all these are mystifications. Huysmans, the *farceur*, is enjoying himself. His liquor symphony he borrowed from *La Chimie du Goût* by Polycarpe Poncelet; from Zola, perhaps, his concert of flowers. The voyage to London is a veritable comic stroke. Fully prepared to face the rigors of the Channel, des Esseintes reaches the neighborhood of the Gare Saint-Lazare. Then he remembers how disenchanted he was with Holland. He enters an English chop-house. He drinks ale, he eats roast beef, Stilton cheese, and recalls scenes from Dickens. Exhausted, he returns home to his Thebaid, fairly saturated with English life and customs, though without fear of the usual reaction after foreign travel. "*A Rebours*," notwithstanding Huysmans' later pilgrimage to Canossa, was never excelled. It is his most personal achievement. It also contains the most beautiful writing of this Paganini of prose.

"*En Rade*" (1887) did not attract much attention. It is not dull; on the contrary, it is very Huysmansish. But it is not a subject that enthral. Jacques Marles and his wife have lost their money. They go into the country to live cheaply. The author's detestation of nature was apparently the motive for writing the book. There are episodes of fantasy and realistic descriptions of a calf's birth and a cat's agony that prove the one-time disciple of Zola had not lost his vision; the truth is, Zola's method is melodramatic, romantic, vague, when compared to Huysmans' implacable manner of photographing petty facts.

But in "*Là-Bas*" he takes a leap across the ditch of naturalism and reaches another, if not more delectable, territory. This was in 1891. A new manifesto must be made—the Goncourts had printed a bookful. Symbolism, not naturalism, is now the shibboleth. Huysmans declares that:

"It is essential to preserve the veracity of the document, the precision of detail, the fibrous and nervous language of Realism, but it is equally essential to become the well-digger of the soul, and not to

attempt to explain what is mysterious by mental maladies. . . . It is essential, in a word, to follow the great road so deeply dug out by Zola, but it is also necessary to trace a parallel pathway in the air, another road by which we may reach the Beyond, to achieve thus a Spiritual naturalism."

And by a curious, a bizarre, route Durtal, the everlasting Durtal, sought to achieve spiritually—a spirituality *à rebours*, for it was by devil-worship and the study of Gilles de Rais of ill fame, that he reached his goal. We also study church bells, *incubi*, satanism, demons, witches, sacrileges of a *raffiné* sort; indeed, an enormous amount of occult lumber is dumped into the book, which is indigestible on that account. Diabolic lore *à la* Jules Dubois and other modern magi is profuse. That wicked lady, who is far from credible, Madame Chantelouve, flits through various chapters. Her final disappearance, one hopes "below"—like the devils in the pantomime—is received by Durtal and the reader with a sigh of relief. She is quite the vilest character in French fiction, and, as Stendhal would say, her only excuse is that she never existed. The Black Mass is painted by an artist adroit in the manipulation of the sombre and magnificent.

But "*Là-Bas*" proved a prophetic weather-vane. "*En Route*" in 1895 did not astonish those who had been studying the spiritual fluctuations of Huysmans. Behold the miracle! He is a believing Christian. Wisely the antecedent causes were tacitly avoided. "I believe," said Durtal, simply. Of superior interest is his struggle up the ladder to perfection. This painful feat is slowly accomplished in "*La Cathédrale*" (1898), "*L'Oblat*" (1903) and "*Lourdes*" (1906). And it must be confessed that the more pious grew M. Huysmans the less artist he—as might have been expected. What is his art to a man who is concerned not with the things of this world? He never lost his acerbity, nor his faculty for the phrase magical, though his sense of proportion gradually vanished. Luckily he is not saccharine like the majority of writers on religious topics. Ferdinand Brunetière complained that Flaubert was unbearably erudite in his three short stories—echoing what Sainte-Beuve had said of Salammbo years before. What must he have thought of that astonishing "Cathedral," with its chapters on the symbolism of architecture, sculpture, gems, flowers (Sir Thomas Browne and his quincunxes are fairly beaten from the field), vestments, sacred vessels of the

altar and a multitude of mysterious things, hieroglyphics and dark liturgical riddles? There are ravishing pages, though none so solemn and moving as the description of the "*De profundis*" and "*Dies iræ*" in "*En Route*."

For any one except the trailer after strange souls "The Oblate" is an affliction. Madame Bavoil, with her *notre ami*, is a chattering nuisance, withal a worthy creature. Durtal is always in the dumps. He speaks much of interior peace, but he gives the impression of a man sitting painfully amidst spiritual brambles. Perhaps he felt that for him after his Golgotha are the sweet-singing flames of Purgatory. We are not sorry when he returns to Paris. As for the book on "*Lourdes*," it is like an open wound. A whiff from the operating-room of a hospital comes to you. We are, doubtless, edified by the childlike faith with which Huysmans accepts the report of cures that would stagger the most perfervid Christian Scientist. If Zola's "*Lourdes*" was a calamity, Huysmans' is a mistake. It is said that, at his request, his friends destroyed many of his manuscripts; if they were of the "*Lourdes*" kind let us be grateful. His "*Pages Catholiques*" and "*Sainte-Lydwine*" are hard reading, written by a man whose mysticism was a matter of rigid definition, a thing to be weighed and felt and verbally proved.

Of far more literary and critical worth are the three books, "*L'Art Moderne*" (1883), "*Certains*" (1889) and "*De Tout*" (1901). In collaboration with Léon Hennique, Huysmans contributed his share in a pantomime, "*Pierrot Sceptique*" (1881). "*L'Art Moderne*" is the most revolutionary volume of art criticism written during the last century. Baudelaire went far; he introduced Richard Wagner and Manet; but Huysmans went "further"—as the phrase goes. He championed such ultra-realists as Edgar Degas—he was the first to recognize his genius for depicting mercilessly the shivering, tired flesh of working-women; Raffaëlli, Monet, Pissarro, Gauguin, he wrote of, and many others. His *Salons* are models of elegant invective directed, not only against the academic group, but at their upholders and purchasers—chiefly American millionaires. In "*Certains*," he exploits the talents of Moreau, Chéret, Whistler, Jan Luyken, Odilon Redon, Paul Cézanne—at a time when the last-named was howled down by critics and public. And in a remarkable study of Félicien Rops, he definitely "ranged" that unique

etcher of erotic diabolism. The art criticism of Huysmans cannot be overestimated. And what a vocabulary! What powers of evocation! "*De Tout*" contains new *croquis*, with more variety as to place and subject. Fleming-like, he is less melodist than harmonist in these essays—and such acrid harmonies, polyphonic variations and fuguelike flights to the other side of good and evil.

George Moore was the first English-speaking critic to recognize Huysmans. He wrote that "a page of Huysmans is as a dose of opium, a glass of exquisite and powerful liquor." Frankly, it was his conversion that focussed upon Huysmans so much attention. No one may remain isolated in his century. He has never been a favorite with the larger Parisian public; rather, a curiosity, a spiritual ogre turned saint. And the saintship has been hotly disputed.

Huysmans was not a man of, what is so vaguely denominated, "general ideas." He was never interested in the chess-play of metaphysics, politics or science. He was a specialist, one who had ransacked libraries for curious details, despoiled perfumers' catalogues for their odorous vocables, pored over technical dictionaries for odd-colored words, and studied cook-books for savory terms. His gamut of sensations began at the violet ray. He was a perverse aristocrat who descended to the gutter there to analyze the various stratifications of filth; when he returned to his ivory cell, he had discovered, not humanity, but the anodyne of religion, the love of God. Thenceforth, he was interested in one thing—the saving of the soul of Joris-Karl Huysmans, and being a marvellous verbal artist, his recital of the event startled us, fascinated us. Renan once wrote of Amiel: "He speaks of sin, of salvation, of redemption and conversion, as if these things were realities." Let us rather imitate Sainte-Beuve, who said: "You may not cease to be a sceptic after reading Pascal, but you must cease to treat believers with contempt." And this injunction is not difficult to obey in the case of Huysmans, for whom the things derided by Renan were the profoundest realities of his tortured and troubled life.

JAMES HUNEKER.